

**Senate Select Committee on School Safety Hearing on
“Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity Discrimination and School Safety”**

Plummer Park- Fiesta Hall, West Hollywood

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Testimony of Teri Erickson

My name is Teri Erickson. I'm from San Carlos and I'm married. My husband and I have two kids - a daughter, Carly, who is a stereotypical 13 year old girl - she's into make-up, talking on the phone and boys. Our son, Mitchell, is 11, but he's not a stereotypical boy. His best friends have always been girls, he's never played with trucks or liked sports, he enjoys wearing dresses and likes to put on make-up, and he's very artsy.

School has always been tough for Mitchell, socially. In kindergarten Mitchell used to bring in dolls from his doll collection for sharing, which started a fair amount of teasing. By the end of the school year, the boys in the class were calling him a girl and calling him gay. In kindergarten.

When Mitchell was in second grade, the Spice Girls were at their height of popularity, and Mitchell was crazy about them. He'd dress like them (especially Ginger Spice, the red-haired one), and he knew all their songs by heart. He had a Spice Girl backpack, a Spice Girl lunch box and, since the Spice Girls all wore platform tennis shoes, Mitchell wore a pair of white platform tennis shoes. That year, he was called a girl, gay, Spice Boy and a fag. In second grade.

I constantly talked to teachers and the principal about what was happening to Mitch, but the school didn't know what to do about the problem. When Mitchell was in 3rd grade, the teachers finally had a training session on anti-gay harassment, but there was never any follow up, and the kids in the school were never educated. Almost always, Mitchell's teachers' hearts were in the right place, but they just didn't know what to do, and they didn't get a lot of support from the principal. Often, they were frightened to even mention the word “gay” to the students. After one name-calling incident, the teacher talked to her class about teasing, but the talk was so general that the kids in the class didn't connect her talk to their calling Mitchell “gay” at lunch.

By the time Mitchell got to 4th grade, he hated going to school. Even though the Spice Girl rage was long over, kids still called him “Spice Girl Lover,” and a girl. My husband and I tried talking to administrators and to his teachers, but at this point we were just treated as troublemakers. The principal told Mitchell that it was his responsibility to report every harassment incident, otherwise nothing could be done.

On the last week of 4th grade, Mitchell's class had a sports day at school. Mitchell's team was assigned the color yellow, and a group of boys said that it was good that Mitchell was on the yellow team, since yellow was a girl's color. That same day, two girls drew a picture of Mitchell on the whiteboard in the classroom - a picture of Mitchell in a dress, with Mitchell's name next to the picture, the word “boy” in a circle, with a line crossed through it. The teacher was in the room when this happened. She made the girls erase the picture, and that was it.

Then, as the games for sports day were about to begin, one boy sprayed Mitchell's crotch with water, and told everyone that Mitchell had peed in his pants.

I pulled Mitchell out of school that day, at Mitchell's request. One parent called me and said that it was my fault that Mitchell had all these problems because I'd allowed him to dress differently and bring his Spice Girl back pack to school. I asked Mitchell about that later, if he wished I'd not allowed him to be different, and he said that that would have been worse - at least this way, he was able to make friends who were girls and they're still his good friends to this day. He said he didn't feel like he could have pretended all that time to be someone different.

Now in 6th grade, things are better, but not much. Mitchell is at a very supportive school with teachers and administrators who are committed to ensuring a safe environment. Yet, they don't really know how to make that happen. The principal and school counselor's solution was to have Mitchell report to them any incidents of abuse. I don't think that my son should be responsible for keeping himself safe at school - I believe the school should create that safe environment for him.

Mitchell believes that part of the solution to this problem is better adult supervision at school. Most of the name calling happens during lunchtime, when there is only 1 adult to supervise hundreds of children. I believe that part of the solution is to first educate teachers on anti-gay teasing and harassment, and ensure that they know how devastating this kind of teasing can be. Second, ensure that educators know that they can talk about gay issues in California schools, even as early as kindergarten. Although there is a movement afoot in California to "opt out" students from discussions that involve sexual orientation, California law only allows opting out when the discussion involves sexual behavior. Sexual orientation should be talked about as a characteristic, not a behavior, and educators should be given the vocabulary to allow them to do that at all grade levels. Last, children should be taught about bullying and teasing, and anti-gay harassment should always be a part of that program. My experience is that children (and, unfortunately, many teachers) don't see anti-gay harassment as particularly serious.

It's important for anti-harassment training of children to begin in kindergarten, and continue to have it emphasized in every grade thereafter. Too often, we don't start talking about gender identity until high school, thinking that it's not something we talk about until kids go through puberty. However, my 11 year old son has been harassed not for being gay (and we don't know what he'll turn out to be yet), but for other kids' perceptions of him as gay because he didn't conform to traditional ideas of what a boy should do and what a boy should look like. The training needs to use the word "gay" so that kids are very clear on what's included in bullying and name-calling. Educators at each school site need to examine their school environment, specifically looking for locations and times of day when kids are likely to not be safe or to be harassed away from the eyes and ears of an adult, and put an adult in that time or location. Educators need to model appropriate behavior - by being hyper-aware of gender issues and their own prejudices (because those are the easiest to overlook in ourselves) and to intentionally be inclusive (for example, finding new ways to divide classes into groups that don't involve gender).

When AB537 first became law, I told Mitchell (who was 8 at the time) that a new law had passed that had made it against the law for other kids to call him gay and a girl. He came home from school about a week later and said “Mom, I don’t think that the teachers know about that new law.” I hope that the next kindergarten child who is different from the other kids will have teachers and students who know how to treat that child with respect and dignity.